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SUBJECT: USCIRF MEETING WITH VIETNAM'S COMMITTEE ON RELIGIOUS
AFFAIRS

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Summary

1.(SBU) Visiting Commissioners from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) discussed religious freedom with Committee on Religious Affairs Chairman Nguyen The Doanh on October 22. Doanh pointed to significant progress made on religious freedom in Vietnam as a result of the Prime Minister's 2005 Directive on Religion. He acknowledged there is more to be done, particularly in training local officials and in registering house churches more quickly. He offered to investigate any reports of forced renunciations, which he said are clearly against the law and policy of Vietnam. End summary.

2.(SBU) Doanh began the meeting by noting that one could find shortcomings in Vietnam's religious situation but that it was important to have a dialogue and share ideas. If the delegation sees the Buddhist pagodas overflowing with believers during the first and fifteenth of every lunar month, USCIRF members would get a better sense of the importance of religion in Vietnamese life, Doanh said.

3.(SBU) USCIRF Chairman Michael Cromartie thanked Doanh for the work of CRA and said the USCIRF delegation was following up on agreement in the June meeting of Presidents Bush and Triet to continue a dialogue on religious freedom. Cromartie said almost 600 Hmong Protestant churches in the northwest had sought registration but only 50 had received official recognition. Hundreds of southern Protestant house churches had seen their requests for recognition unanswered or denied.

4.(SBU) Doanh responded that the Prime Minister issued a directive on registration of religions in localities on February 9, 2005. Now in the Central Highlands there are around 1,000 recognized meetings points and, by the end of the year, there will be 100 in the Northwest. Vietnam has many religions but pays close attention to the Protestants because there are so many denominations, Doanh said. The number of Protestants in Vietnam is on the rise particularly in mountainous areas with poor communications so there are shortcomings in the relations between local churches and authorities as well as the response by the local authorities to national guidance.

5.(SBU) Cromartie asked if house churches could continue their activities if the local People's Committee did not respond to their requests for registration within the stipulated 30 days. Doanh responded that, in theory, if there is no response the churches should have the right to continue their activities normally.

6.(SBU) Commissioner Preeta Bansal asked whether the GVN's openness to recognizing different sects of Protestantism also extended to

Buddhists organizing independently of the national Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS). Doanh responded that the VBS was established in 1981 in accordance with the wishes of Vietnam's Buddhists and that their nine denominations are represented, including the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam. Doanh said in theory other independent Buddhist groups could be recognized, but it would depend on the structure and goals of the organizations.

7.(SBU) Commissioner Felice Gaer asked about a GVN training manual saying that abnormally rapid conversions must be "subdued." This was supposed to be revised and Gaer asked if this had been done. Doanh said the manual still has many shortcomings but it has been revised. Several thousand local-level officials have been trained regarding religious activities.

8.(SBU) Commissioner Don Argue noted he had been to Vietnam three years ago and that the progress made on religious freedom in that time was very encouraging. He said the Prime Minister's directive had helped but there were still isolated reports of forced renunciations by police. Doanh responded that the GVN is strongly opposed to any violence to renounce faith - this is not in accordance with GVN policy or laws. If any such cases are reported, CRA will work closely with local authorities to address them. The Prime Minister's directive must be implemented at all levels, and meetings and conferences are organized to explain it, with special training for local police. CRA does not have branches at the local level, but the police do so they have a special obligation to implement the law.

9.(SBU) Commissioner Argue said he had direct contacts with Protestant groups in Vietnam and that they were very pleased with this progress - they only want to practice religion, not be political spokespeople. Their frustration is the slow pace of registration and inconsistency in how this is carried out in different provinces. Doanh agreed that this was an issue, and said improving the situation was a gradual process.

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10.(SBU) Commissioner Gaer said there are credible reports that local officials deny educational and medical benefits to converts and asked whether this was endorsed by CRA. Doanh responded that CRA is tasked with working out the body of laws on religion and that all are equal under the law. There may be cases where there is discrimination, but if the CRA is apprised of the facts, then it would strongly oppose such discrimination. He asked USCIRF to provide detailed information on these allegations so CRA could investigate.

11.(SBU) Commissioner Gaer asked whether the changes in Vietnam on religious freedom were the result of international pressure. Doanh said Vietnam pays attention to the views of the international community but decisions for the Vietnamese people must be made by the Vietnamese people. Vietnam's social and economic achievements over the past twenty years have laid a solid basis for changes in spiritual life.

12.(SBU) Doanh noted he had worked for CRA for 27 years and that with recent progress he had never seen a better state of religious freedom in Vietnam. He said that of course he is not completely satisfied with GVN policy - life changes quickly so the policy must be updated to reflect those changes. He cited Ho Chi Minh's statement that the state must help its people have a good life both materially and spiritually.

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